Community action, Docklands, and future prospects

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1. Community action is a reflection of the class and ideological conflicts of the day.

In the 1970s and 1980s, community action expressed the common interest and solidarity of the Docklands communities, the trades unions and the labour movement over three vitally important issues that came together when the Docks were closed down by the Port of London Authority;

• Docklands as a workplace
• Docklands as communities with histories, needs, and skills;
• and Docklands as development land to provide housing and jobs to meet the needs of East London.

It brought together residents, tenants, churches, unions, trades councils, amenity societies and voluntary groups. It was part of the battle to keep the docks open, to met local needs for housing and jobs, to prevent the sale of public assets to big business; and to prevent the City taking over (as was apparent in the early 70s in the redevelopment of St Katherine’s Dock).

The same attack on industry and working communities was happening all over the country- public anger about deindustrialisation and destruction of communities in the coalfields, the steel towns, and elsewhere. It was class war.

For the community this threat to democracy and community, meant saying NO.

“No Locks on the Docks” “No to Stolport” . “No to Canary Wharf”.

It meant exposing through campaigning, research and political lobbying the lie of “trickle down”, and of planning gain
As Docklands was sold off, underwritten by huge sums of public subsidy (direct funding for the LDDC; Enterprise Zone Tax allowances)


“The abandonment of the idea of the city as public good”

This abandonment of the public good was the LDDCs ideological mission on behalf of the Government; and of property capital (represented on the LDDC board by Trafalgar House, MEPC etc).

2. Community action always campaigned for alternatives;

- Community plan and peoples plans
- Community led regeneration as in Community Development Trusts
- Capturing land values for the community through community and public ownership as in Letchworth and the New Towns
- Unlocking the potential of local people to lead, and do regeneration themselves

These alternative visions, ideas, were there – not of course in the LDDCs glossy and excessive publications - but in the battle for Cherry Garden Pier; the Docklands Armadas; the songs of the Tough Cookies; the Peoples Plan for the Royal Docks; Coin Street Community Builders, the Mudshute Farm; the SPLASH campaign; and many more.

The aim was community renewal as Public good – not as market opportunity or shabby compromise- but as shaped by community needs - and passion for community survival.

3. Land was the key battleground;

Pat Hanshaw. Chair of the Association of Wapping Organisations, said;
“The birthright of the people is being sold off. Although the people have never owned the land; they have lived on it, worked on it and died on it. It is their heritage – it should be their future”

To stop land being sold off, and planning consents nodded though for luxury flats and offices, it was vital to get local politicians on our side, OR changing local politics from the inside by local activists becoming elected councillors.

The GLC, with courage and conviction, supported people led planning and regeneration; putting its powers and resources, assets and skills behind the community. The Peoples Plan, the Docklands Armada, the judicial review of the scandalous decision to grant planning consent for Canary Wharf without public involvement, would not have happened without it.

By abolishing the GLC, the Government was the sworn enemy. By colluding with the market and the LDDC, the Docklands local authorities and councillors, with some honourable exceptions, failed the community.

Docklands is a monument to that unequal struggle. That’s why it still hurts.

3. Yet by the mid 1990s, Thatcherite planning seemed to have lost the ideological war. The battle for Docklands was lost but ironically the war was won. Under New Labour there was a swing back to partnership and community regeneration; Local government was required to work with communities as well as the private sector.

The class war was hidden for a while. On the upside this meant a more inclusive approach to planning, and support from government for community consultation and capacity building. Community action became part of governance.

Communities got entangled and often compromised by the bureaucracy of government and partnership; trying to get recognition and planning gain. But
unequal partnerships excluded many people; and did not change the balance of power.

Land and planning remained in thrall to the private property market. Behind all the partnership talk, the property market and the public interest were usually miles apart. Land values were privatised and remained that way.

3. Then came the crash. This changed the whole calculus of development (and of class relations). The property market led development model collapsed; local authorities are left with very few private sector partners. There is little or no public finance for infrastructure, or for land assembly; government wants remaining public land to be sold off; there is little private sector money to distribute as planning gain;

Apart from small change from the New Homes Bonus, there is no serious funding for social housing or community services to back up new development; the aim of truly sustainable communities has been effectively dropped by Government to the relief of the property market.

What does this leave? Strategically a politics of negativity – nothing can be done; until the market comes back when it is argued, austerity measures have generated confidence again; we are told (again) here is there is no alternative. Of course this is profoundly untrue.

5. The planning issues in Docklands have not gone away. The housing shortage which lay at the heart of the Docklands conflict is as critical as ever; the gap between rich and poor in the Docklands Boroughs is as sharp as ever (there are 50,000 unemployed in the five Boroughs); getting land and buildings for community development for land trusts and co-housing is a huge and unequal struggle; land values are taken away from the community by landowners and speculators; inequalities in education, skills are as severe as ever; The
Docklands Highway is still a shocking divide; who knows what will happen to the Olympic Legacy lands;

4. But community politics is coming out of its shell. Not because of the Big Society and Localism which in fact conceal the reduction in public services which are critical for successful regeneration (Colin Ward again). But because of anger over cuts in services, huge backlogs of housing need, the squeeze on incomes and benefits for the poorest; and anger about gross inequality in society, cities and towns.

John Pilger describes the current situation since the banking crisis as a “corporate coup de etat” (New Statesman, 27 June 2011)

Will Hutton in his latest book, Them and Us, says “A healthy society or economy cannot be built on rotten foundations. There must be change”.

5. The labour movement which was the key reference point for the community struggles of the 70s and 80s, no longer underpins the new politics of protest.

There is a more complex struggle with different social alignments. Social action is emerging in community opposition to cuts, the anger of public service workers over pensions and pay freezes; student protests over fees; on line protest networks like 38 degrees, UK Uncut; campaigns against outrageous tax avoidance. The language of resistance, of class war - is different.

This mood of grass roots anger and discontent will in the end impact on housing, land, planning and development. Even the Localism Bill with its aim to distract from the cuts and the wider inequalities of the land and property market, may have unexpected consequences. Suppose local people use the new Community Rights in the Bill to challenge the market or government policy. Suppose local people demand localism which challenges the status
quo. Local authorities who are the gatekeepers will try to stop them, but local politics may be more unpredictable as a result than the Government hope.

The lesson of Docklands is that the battle for land, for social justice in housing and jobs, for real sustainable development, and for democratic control over the development machine is far from over.

For the moment, the development machine has lost the initiative. The initiative rests with the new politics of community action.